

Cathy Come Off Benefits: A comparative ideological analysis of *Cathy Come Home* and *Benefits Street*

BEN LAMB
Teesside University
B.Lamb@tees.ac.uk

Keywords:

Cathy Come Home, *Benefits Street*, Poverty Porn, Welfare State, austerity, 'reality TV', 'docudrama', 'television documentary'

Author biography:

Dr Ben Lamb is Research Lecturer in Media Studies at Teesside University. As a television historian, his established research examines representations of social class, gender and political discourse across genres of factual and fictional programming. He is also interested in the relationship between aesthetics and ideology, and how different television production systems have impacted upon the resultant modes of realism. Ben's current research project examines how past regional television disseminated the purpose and role of the welfare state throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

Abstract

This article examines how representations of the welfare state have considerably changed in mainstream UK documentary journalism. A comparative analysis of *Cathy Come Home* (1966) in relation to *Benefits Street* (2014-) will be undertaken to determine how the ideological composition and discursive practices of documentary journalism have changed since the 1960s, and how the social role of television has altered in this process. Both *Cathy Come Home* and *Benefits Street* were the most watched, circulated, and influential documentaries of their respective eras and worked as key reference points throughout wider culture and the political sphere, when the purpose of the welfare state was disseminated and future welfare policy has been debated. Whilst *Cathy Come Home* is frequently accredited with inspiring philanthropy throughout the nation as a whole and fostering national widespread sympathy towards those reliant on social security, *Benefits Street* has been heavily criticised for stigmatising vulnerable people and perpetuating the Conservative cabinet's distinction between 'strivers' and 'skivers'. In both eras, Britain was experiencing similar social housing crises and each government's response to the lack of affordable housing has been substantially determined by the symbiotic relationship shared between television and governmental agenda. Therefore, this analysis takes a critical approach to the discursive mechanisms and social practices at work in each text by considering to their socio-economic contexts, the wider socio-political discourse of which they are a part, and the journalistic genres that they belong to.

Poverty Porn

Over the past three years, terrestrial broadcasters have put a sizeable amount of their documentary resources into scrutinising citizens who are wholly dependent on social security or 'benefits'. Notable programmes commissioned by the BBC documentary department include: *Britain on the Fiddle* (2013), *Growing Up Poor* (2013), *Nick and Margaret: We All Pay Your Benefits* (2013), and *Don't Cap My Benefits* (2014). Fellow public service broadcaster Channel 4 has transmitted *Benefits Britain 1949* (2013), *How to Get a Council House* (2013-), *Skint* (2013), *Britain's Benefit Tenants* (2014), *Britain on Benefits* (2014), and *Rich and on Benefits* (2014). Then commercial network Channel 5 has aired *On Benefits & Proud* (2013), *The Big Benefits Row: Live* (2014), *Benefits Britain: Life on The Dole* (2014), *Can't Pay, We'll Take It Away!* (2014-), and *Gypsies On Benefits & Proud* (2014). Whether being broadcast under the pretence of highbrow informative educational output or lowbrow entertainment, 'poverty porn' has become an established television genre.

'Poverty porn' is a pejorative term which was first popularised by journalists who criticised the Oscar winning film *Slumdog Millionaire* for sensationalising the plight of homeless Indian children for the purposes of 'feel good' entertainment (Miles, 2009). However, since the proliferation of these aforementioned documentaries, 'poverty porn' has since come to be understood by the public as 'reality TV programmes that document the daily lives of the unemployed urban poor living on housing estates' (Dahlgreen, 2013). Although such outputs in no way involve explicit representations of sex acts or overtly eroticized bodies, they are labelled as porn for 'stressing the viewer's distance from the scenes represented and by facilitating an unethical passivity before representations which are framed and marketed as entertainment' (Hester, 2014: 208). Within such programmes the lives of the poor are represented to a viewer as a 'moral

site for scrutiny, something to be peered at, dissected and assessed' (Jensen, 2014). According to Jensen (2014), the ideological purpose of this poverty porn programming within a British broadcasting context is to compel viewers into understanding social insecurity (their own and that of others) as 'a problem of self-discipline, resilience and responsibility, rather than as a consequence of the extensions and excesses of neoliberalism'.

Channel 4's first series of *Benefits Street* (2014-) exemplifies this particular manifestation of poverty porn. The five part documentary series follows the residents of James Turner Street, Birmingham, who are unemployed and wholly reliant on the state for financial support. No other programme of this burgeoning 'poverty porn' genre has attracted as much press attention, drawn in as many viewers or instigated as wide a national debate. Not even the second series based in Kingston Road, Stockton, could retain as large an audience or garner as much discussion. Peaking at 5.2 million viewers in its third episode, the first series of *Benefits Street* represented Channel 4's most successful programme since 2012 when the *Paralympic Closing Ceremony* drew in 7.7million viewers.ⁱ These five episodes of *Benefits Street* appear to encompass the terms under which the future of social security continues to be debated in the mainstream media.

The purpose of this article, then, is to comparatively analyse *Benefits Street* in relation to Ken Loach's critically revered documentary drama *Cathy Come Home*. Initially broadcast by the BBC on 16th November 1966, its repeat on 11th January 1967 attracted 12 million viewers - 24% of the population at that time (Lacey, 2011: 112). This analysis contributes to the critical work on the discursive construction of journalistic texts as the comparative analysis will assess how perceptions of social security are mediated by the television industry, debated in the press and then consumed by the public and how this process has changed. In doing so I adopt a multimodal approach (van Leeuwen, 2004; Machin and Mayr, 2012) by analysing a range of visual and audio components in the programmes to offer ways in which 'we can think about how culture, society, power and ideology are both influenced by, and influencing, the social relations in which they are constructed' (Kelsey, 2015: 5).

Whilst these two texts are usually analysed under the televisual strand of media studies, both programmes have strong foundations in documentary journalism and so warrant study within a journalism and discourse context. *Cathy Come Home* scriptwriter Jeremy Sandford came from a journalism background. Following the eviction of his neighbours in 1961, he was so appalled by their subsequent living conditions that he wrote an exposé in *The Observer* which he deems to be the 'first ever report in a national newspaper about Britain's homeless' (BBC 1966). This article was then followed by an item on the BBC's *Panorama* before being developed into a radio documentary entitled *Homeless Families* (1961), comprising of interviews with housing officials and families living in hostels. This meticulous research is what formed the backbone of his television docudrama which was eventually picked up by television producer Tony Garnett, having spent several years languishing in development at the BBC. As Lacey has commented, Sandford's description of the conditions families had to live inⁱⁱ 'illustrate his stance as a journalist, committed to helping the people about whom he was researching, and writing from the assumption that his main task was to bring the experience of the socially marginalised before the public gaze' (Lacey, 2007: 22).

In a similar vein, whenever *Benefits Street* receives praise, it does so when being aligned with journalistic practice. Fraser Nelson claims that *Benefits Street* 'is what good journalism is about: bringing attentions to ignored problems, especially if those affected are those who normally have no voice. Then starting a debate' (Nelson, 2014b). This is a practice which Nelson believes 'BBC journalists have shied away from' in exposing the current nature of British poverty' (Nelson, 2014c).

Nevertheless, as pieces of documentary journalism *Cathy Come Home* has been credited 'with both changing the law governing hostel accommodation and launching the housing charity, Shelter' (Lacey, 2007: 47), whilst *Benefits Street* has reaffirmed the current status quo rather than challenged it. The current Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith told the Centre for Social Justice in a speech that '...we let these problems be ghettoised as though they were a different country. Even now, for the most part they remain out of sight – meaning people are shocked when they are confronted with a TV programme such as *Benefits Street*' (Duncan Smith, 2014). *Benefits Street* was used as a means of justifying Duncan Smith's cuts to the welfare state and introduction of a universal credit system that will see people receive less financial support in real terms. Similarly public attention has been largely negative, with death threats aimed towards James Turner residents on Twitter. In order to investigate how the audio visual composition of both journalistic texts initiated very different impassioned public reactions, the socio-economic context of Britain in 1966 and 2014 must be first taken into account.

Socio-economic context

The 1960s presented an interesting dichotomy between public notions of increasing affluence and snowballing levels of poverty. Britain boasted full employment, earnings increased by 110%, and the standard of living rose by 30%. From 1951 to 1964, the sales of fridges, telephones and washing machines more than doubled. In 1951, there were 760,000 licensed television sets in the UK but by 1964 this had risen to 13 million, which amounted to 82 per cent of the UK population (Lacey, 2011: 10). However, this affluence was undoubtedly more selective than such rhetoric has suggested. Statistics charting the rising ownership of consumer durables disguised the inequality that existed in the distribution of wealth and widespread social housing issues (Hill, 1986: 9). From 1957, some of the 'worst abuses' of the post-war housing system were enacted (Lacey, 2011: 11). Slum landlords such as Peter Rachman created 'empires of high-cost, multiple-occupancy housing' by forcibly evicting tenants, and then overcrowding their properties with immigrants at a higher cost (Lacey 2011: 11). Harold Wilson's Labour government was aware of the problem, and in 1965 produced a white paper noting that 3 million families 'still live in slums, near slums or in grossly overcrowded conditions' (Wilson, 1970: 36). The paper proposed that 3.7 million dwellings be built immediately to solve the crisis, and noted that 180,000 would be needed each year thereafter. This was far in excess of anything attempted to that point, but was quietly ignored amid the optimism of the 1966, and narratives of national success.

In comparison, we also live in contradictory times where national narratives of historical rises in employment are undercut by statistics that reveal a substantial decrease in living standards. According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS) the employment rate has steadied at 73% over 2015, the highest rate of people in work since the ONS began keeping recordsⁱⁱⁱ. David Cameron believes he has overseen 1.89

million more people in finding work, and has resultantly presided over the largest number of people ever employed in the UK (Cameron 2015). Similarly the Homes and Communities Agency reported that they delivered 38,845 housing starts in the 2013-14 financial year, 85% of which were affordable homes - a 26% increase of the affordable housing starts in 2012-13 (Homes and Communities Agency, 2014: 3).

However, *Just Fair* (a consortium consisting of Oxfam, Amnesty International, Save the Children and Unicef) claim that the UK is in breach of its United Nations human rights commitment to provide people with adequate homes and the right to housing is in 'crisis'. A quarter of people living in private rented sector properties rely on housing benefit, and a third of these homes do not meet 'basic standards of health, safety and habitability' (Hohmann, 2015: 5). Furthermore the number of families living in bed and breakfast accommodation more than tripled, from 630 in 2010 to 2,040 in 2014 (Hohmann, 2015: 25). Correspondingly, housing charity Shelter has found that in 2013/14, more than 52,000 households were accepted by local authorities as 'homeless and in priority need' (Shelter Databank, 2015). So, like the 1960s, there are conflicting reports and statistics when it comes to rising levels of affluence in relation to adequate housing.

Television production and genre

Mainstream television's response to these dichotomous narratives has changed largely due to the different production hierarchies in place. The expansion of the BBC in the early 1960s recruited a generation of practitioners and dramatists from working class backgrounds, resultant of the grammar school system. These self-proclaimed social activists and radicals made it their mission to create dramas that dealt with serious social issues and contained an underlying moral imperative. Producer James MacTaggart's approach to *The Wednesday Play* anthology series within which *Cathy Come Home* was produced, was to 'bring a contemporary, socially extended drama onto the television screen for a popular audience' (Lacey, 2007: 36). Under this public service broadcasting ethos journalist/scriptwriter Jeremy Sandford provided a depiction of the previously hidden condition of the working classes. In the television play, Cathy (Carol White) marries and has children with a truck driver named Reg Ward (Ray Brooks). However, an injury prevents Ray from working, and they soon find themselves descending through different levels of the housing system including the private rented sector, local authority housing, and hostels for the homeless. Eventually Cathy becomes homeless and her children are taken into care.

In television scholarship, *Cathy Come Home* has come to epitomise the docudrama genre. It is a landmark text from a lineage of docudramas that use 'an invented sequence of events and fictional protagonists to illustrate the salient features of real historical occurrences or situations' (Paget, 1998: 82). A fusion of factual and fictional aesthetics ensure that audiences are engrossed in the fictional characters but are also educated on Britain's housing situation. The social housing conditions of Islington and Ladywood, Birmingham, are captured through 16mm cameras which at the time were exclusively used for news and current affairs programming. Throughout the drama, real people living in slum-like conditions provide their views on their housing situation that interject the fictional and dramatic scenes.

Fast forward to the present day, and the reality television genre now dominates schedules, combining empathy and observation in a different way. The emergence of the docusoap, which regularly attracted audiences between 8 -12 million from 1996 to 2000, was the catalyst that reconceptualised factual broadcasting. Successes such as *Airport* (1996-2008), *Driving School* (1997), and *Airline* (1998-2007), focused predominantly on white-collar workers from service industries. Crucial to their success was the marginalisation of subsidiary socio-political issues at the expense of elevated personalities (Bruzzi, 2006: 123). There was now a focus on recurrent 'characters' in their everyday family lives, 'interweaved in a soap opera style', complete with 'melodramatic moments, cliff hangers, hyperbole and personality clashes' (Biressi and Nunn, 2005: 64).

Transposing this formula of the docusoap into surveilled competitions in programmes such as *Big Brother* (2000-), *Wife Swap* (2003-2009) and *The Apprentice* (2005-) then formed the basis of the reality television revolution. These programmes place further importance on emotion and character through the regular depiction of heightened conflicts. Thus, unlike docudramas, reality television is a genre that is primarily concerned with the 'politics of identity' rather than 'the politics of collective action, group power, electoral power or labour power' (Biressi and Nunn, 2005: 3). Reality television has overtaken the docudrama as the most popular form of television programming combining documentary and drama. *Benefits Street*, with its focus on a day in the life of outlandish figures such as White Dee and Fungi, and the conflicts that they endure, is an after product of reality television's success and an extension of its objectives.

Analytical Framework

In order to understand the contrasting social impact of *Cathy Come Home* in relation to *Benefits Street*, a conceptual application of Althusserian ideology will be used as an analytical framework to textually analyse the differences between each programme's key discursive practices. Although this textual analysis is *not* lexical in nature, it follows Fairclough's three-dimensional framework of critical discourse analysis as it connects an Althusserian textual analysis to discourse and sociocultural practices, thus ensuring that the 'analysis of texts is not artificially isolated from analysis of institutional and discursive practices within which texts are embedded' (Fairclough, 1995: 9). As Kelsey states:

Even within a multimodal approach that incorporates an eclectic synergy of conceptual frameworks, it is still useful to think about discourse operating on the three layers that Fairclough's model (1995) has so usefully offered in discourse research: textual analysis, discursive practice, social practice. (Kelsey, 2015: 5).

Althusser's theory is that 'the reproduction of labour power requires a reproduction of its submission to the rules of an established order' (Althusser, 2008: 6). This is achieved through centralised state apparatus (government, police, courts) and fragmented Ideological State Apparatuses including the press, radio and television. Althusser believes that ISAs are capable of providing 'an objective field to contradictions which express the effects of the clashes between the capitalist class struggle and the proletarian class struggle' (Althusser, 2008: 23). When applied to analysing televisual

outputs, examining contradiction in texts encourages an understanding of instabilities in a culture as 'the places where the dominant system is most clearly exposed' (White, 1992: 179). As such, ideology is not a fixed set of beliefs, but 'an arena of representational practice (and therefore a site of struggle and contestation)', thus ideological criticism aims to 'expose the fault lines within the system' (White, 1992: 179). For example, White's ideological analysis of detective series *Cagney and Lacey* (1981-88), following Althusser's conception of ideology deduces that progressive plotlines dealing with sexual harassment are undermined by the visual and narrative strategies which rely on traditional plot structures and conventional modes of visual representation. Notably, recurring shots framing the central characters as appearing caged or trapped undercut their seemingly autonomous dialogue. Examining contradictions in *Cathy Come Home* and *Benefits Street* in this manner will uncover how they debate social security in relation to each superstructure and to what extent they have been interventionist.

Comparative Textual Analysis

With this analytical framework, the comparative textual analysis will now be broken down into four sections that separately consider how each principal convention of documentary journalism operate differently within the docudrama and reality television genre traditions. Methodically analysing how the utilisation of captions, commentary, observational camerawork, and representation of societal figures operate differently as discursive mechanisms within each genre and the contradictions that materialise provide ideological insight into why the public and press have responded so differently to these representations.

Captions

According to Paget (1998: 67), the use of captions are central to the docudrama as they 'set the scene' and 'put the audience in touch with "out-of-story" events and characters'. Captions are used at the end of *Cathy Come Home* to situate the drama within the larger national housing epidemic. After Cathy's children are taken into care, on-screen subtitles inform us that:

All the events in this film took place in Britain within the last eighteen months. 4,000 children are separated from their parents and taken into care each year because their parents are homeless. West Germany has built twice as many houses as Britain since the war.

These words overlay a dishevelled close-up of Cathy at night time as she looks from side to side watching passing traffic in an attempt to hitchhike to a new location. She is now homeless having had her children forcibly taken away from her. Her hair is greasy and unkempt, she has dirt on her face, and her upturned collar covers her neck and cheeks to protect her from the cold night. She looks onwards at the traffic with a slight grimace and all we can hear are the lorries, cars and motorbikes rolling by. This image directly replicates the first shot of the play to neatly envelope its start and conclusion. The play begins with Cathy looking over motorway traffic during a bright summer's day in exactly the same scale of close-up. She smiles as she looks from side to side flicking her hair and lightly biting the tip of her finger as if flirting with the traffic. She is excited to

leave her childhood home and begin her adventure as a liberated adult in 1960s Britain. The motorway itself was a relatively new invention symbolising an autonomous freedom of movement.

This image of Cathy is accompanied by the title of the play 'Cathy Come Home', presented on the screen whilst Sonny and Cher's upbeat version of Hedy West's folk song 'Five Hundred Miles' loudly drowns out the diegetic sound of the traffic. The collar of Cathy's coat is folded down to display her whole face in the sunlight thus providing her with an angelic quality. However, by the end of the play she becomes an isolated figure shrouded in darkness. Only the monotonous sound of the traffic accompanies her and the lack of music in the background has a haunting feel. Such a visual contrast between the opening and conclusion functions to emphasise the stark downfall of her character and the accompaniment of the captions stresses the typicality of her situation. She is one of many who wants to conform to what a capitalist society expects of her; to preside over a family in a home of her own. It is due to factors outside of her control and failures within the housing sector that are largely responsible for her circumstances. The words on screen are an essential component within these emotional scenes to demonstrate how this harrowing downfall was commonplace for many.

In comparison the use of captions in *Benefits Street* possess a very different purpose. Repeatedly subtitles are used to 'other' the participants rather than situate them within a wider national context. Largely this comes from reality television's interest in outlandish personalities over wider sociological issues. In the first instance, subtitles are used throughout the series to make muffled lines of dialogue audible or strong regional dialects decipherable. However, often this subtitling is inconsistent and is used to highlight controversial lines of dialogue under the guise of making some utterances understandable. In a number of instances, a line of dialogue will be captioned even though no subtitles have been used previously throughout the scene, and the line of dialogue in question is just as clear.

In a notable scene, James Turner resident Becky buys some toilet roll, washing powder, fabric softener on her doorstep and receives some free sweets for her children from fellow resident and self-proclaimed '50p Man', Smoggy. After purchasing each of these items for 50p, the camera cuts to a shot of her infant son Callum. He shows his new sweets to other children in the street, as the on screen words 'the government cuts are fucking up everyone' accompany Becky's perfectly audible dialogue. The cut feels slightly out of place, as it is the only shot that does not feature either Becky or Smoggy as they converse on the doorstep. It interjects their conversation for just this one line of dialogue. After Becky has revealed her thoughts on the government to Smoggy, the camera lingers for a second longer than necessary, with the dialogue displayed prominently on screen, before cutting back to the previous shot of them both as if to resume the conversation from this interruption. This juxtaposition between emphasised dialogue and children in the street focuses our attention towards Becky's bad language and lack of personal culpability for the conditions her child lives in, given that she and her partner, Mark, do not work.

It could be argued that Becky's subtitled dialogue is positioned at this particular moment to point blame at the government and how its actions have influenced the living conditions of her and her son. But, in the context of the whole scene, it is a contradiction revealing the programme's ideological stance towards welfare.

Throughout this whole segment of the programme, we follow Smoggy as he voluntarily travels around the neighbourhood knocking on doors to provide people with affordable essentials. The programme appears to praise those who have aligned themselves with David Cameron's Big Society initiative. This policy was introduced to:

Give citizens, communities and local government the power and information they need to come together, solve the problems they face and build the Britain they want...Only when people and communities are given more power and take more responsibility can we achieve fairness and opportunity for all. (Cabinet Office 2010: 1).

So whilst subtitling this dialogue can appear to emphasise the government's failure to act, within the context of the whole scene, its function is to approve those who have taken responsibility for their circumstances and their community. Throughout this segment of the programme, we have been following Smoggy's philanthropy, as he claims '...making a difference that's my reward. Me helping them is them helping me'. His reasoning mirrors that of the Big Society initiative, as he is coming together with fellow residents, solving the problems his community faces, and building the society he wants. Therefore, Becky's highlighted dialogue that 'the government cuts are fucking everyone up' interrupts a scene of the big society seemingly working thus stigmatising her for not proactively taking responsibility for her circumstances.

The second use of captions in *Benefits Street* comes in the form of the hashtag '#Benefitsstreet'. Curiously, this hashtag is not displayed as the advert break commences but is displayed on screen seven seconds earlier whilst something controversial is being depicted. Once this controversial moment ceases, another caption displaying the words 'Benefits Street' is displayed on screen to signal the advert break. In episode one, the hashtag is displayed as Danny sits on his doorstep, drinking a beer as he boasts about the stab wounds he received in prison, as well as his 200 offences and 80 convictions. As he proudly smiles about his 'achievements' the hashtag is displayed to encourage audiences to tweet their thoughts on this information. Later in the episode, Fungi instructs the camera how to steal from an Asda van by pointing out the hidden CCTV cameras.

As this information is disclosed, the hashtag is displayed. *Benefits Street* has been structured so that the most shocking aspects of the programme are broadcast before the adverts commence alongside a cue to tweet. Therefore audiences have the time to retain the information and subsequently tweet their opinions throughout the break which in turn raises the national profile of the programme. These semiotic cues to tweet are what Jensen (2014) classifies in the poverty porn genre as 'red flags of moral outrage' that 'require no interpretative work from the viewer'. The composition of these hashtags subscribe to her theory of 'fast media', whose currency is 'outrage, scandal and attention, and fast media careers, which are made through ratings figures, column inches and hashtags' (Jensen, 2014).

Lastly, the third use of captions introduces each resident. This happens three or four times an episode in addition to the narrator reminding us of each person's name. Usually after an advert break, a character will complain directly to the camera about how they receive less social security money. In one instance, Mark and Becky exclaim 'how are we supposed to live off £50 a week?...' and White Dee informs the camera that 'everyone's benefits have stopped'. Audiences are reminded of each character's name in

such instances, so they are familiar with what each person is called, what their disposition towards works is, and what their key characteristics are, so that it is easier to tweet about them. Effectively, these three uses of captions have a very different function to that of *Cathy Come Home*. Instead of using text to situate them within a national epidemic, they are used to highlight the peculiarity of this location, its people and its culture. The residents are subtitled as if they are speaking another language. They also have controversial perspectives on work which are usually emphasised at a time when the audience is encouraged to tweet. To use Iain Duncan Smith's phrase, the use of captions in *Benefits Street* 'ghettoises' its residents rather than situating them within a wider context.

Voiceovers

According to Paget, the purpose of the voiceover in factual programming is to convey facts and information and to 'contextualise' the mise en scene, be it through 'an actor from the drama, a news anchor commentator, or even a real person involved in the pro-filmic event depicted' (Paget, 1998: 68). In *Cathy Come Home* all three types of voiceover are used. Firstly we are given Cathy's own perspective on past events. As a narrator she reflects and comments on scenes in the drama as if she is sat watching them with us, guiding us through her memories from a future standpoint, reflecting on what happened and explaining to us her rationale behind certain decisions. As a result there is often a contradiction between the squalid images on screen and Cathy's memory of such settings. When her family are forced to move into a caravan they are all wearing thick coats inside a dark, untidy and already overcrowded space. However, Cathy claims 'it wasn't too bad, it was really snug inside, like being on holiday. It was a relief though. I think it was because of the tension we'd be living under the past few weeks'. After this line of dialogue the camera zooms into a close up of her son Sean's face which is covered in dirt, as Ray struggles to light a gas lantern. The purpose of such a contradiction is for an audience to better understand Cathy's psychological reasoning for living there, drawing attention to the desperation of her situation and to foster sympathy.

The other voiceover used is the 'Voice of God', as it is referred to in documentary criticism. Here a dispassionate male voice provides further context in the style of an unbiased news reporter. As the Ward family look for housing in Birmingham, following the death of their landlady and subsequent eviction, a narrator informs us that 'in Birmingham 39,000 families are on the waiting list. Leeds 13,500. Liverpool 19,000. Manchester nearly 15,000'. As the Wards walk through derelict bomb sites that still exist from WW2, Cathy's voiceover claims 'it wasn't long before I realised something; we were lucky to get the old place'. Then the 'Voice of God' continues, informing us 'in Liverpool, 1 house in 9 is on the waiting list, in Manchester it's 1 in 14. In Birmingham there are 4,000 overcrowded houses; 12 people to a house'. Cathy's voice humanises the issue, whilst the 'Voice' draws out its wider context. George Sewell's voice is deliberately flat, toneless, and dispassionate when delivering these statistics so that they can be presented as trustworthy and objective facts. As he delivers his last two lines, the camera focuses on Ray and Cathy's worrisome expressions in close-up as they wander the streets looking for somewhere to live. This clash between objectivity and subjectivity is a point of intersection to connect the personal and the public to humanise the problem whilst drawing attention to its scale.

The third type of voiceover used are the personal testimonies of members of the public living in social housing. At several points throughout *Cathy Come Home*, observational 16mm camerawork observes the real life locations where the drama is based as a non-diegetic bricolage of voices forms a collective experience of the residents. As the camera watches an old woman climb the stairs of a tenement block in Islington, one person off camera informs us that the living arrangements provides 'plenty of company' with 'reasonable people who all get on together'. Another then states 'I don't like one half of the people in it and what is more, none of them are neighbourly. They always have something to say about you behind your back'. Then when Cathy moves into a caravan a voice from the site tells us 'I wouldn't go back to a house', before another remarks 'a caravan was the last resort, and I hate it'. We are presented with conflicting views on what it is actually like to live in such places. Here a space is provided for residents to provide authentic viewpoints. In line with White (1992: 179), the disagreements between the voiceovers in relation to the on-screen imagery creates an 'arena of representational practice' as 'a site of struggle and contestation'.

The only use of a voiceover in *Benefits Street* comes from narrator Tony Hirst. Rather than being a dispassionate 'Voice of God', Hirst's delivery regularly uses upward and downward inflections. The language used is colloquial, judgemental and deliberately avoids using statistics. Compared to Sewell's distanced 'Voice of God' in *Cathy Come Home*, which provides statistical context, Hirst repeatedly scrutinises residents' decisions, choices, and their way of life, and in so doing guides our point of view. We are told in episode one that 'most of the residents are claiming benefits'. Exact statistics are never communicated, the number of people reliant on social security is avoided, as is the type of social security people receive. The fact that 4.3 million working families in receipt of benefits far outweighs the number of people on out of work benefits is never mentioned (MacInnes, 2013).

Hirst's voiceover provides off-screen information about the characters to orientate our standpoint towards them. In the third episode, we are informed that many children on James Turner 'are raised by single parents' and 'despite their ups and downs, Becky and Mark are still together'. The narrator then pauses as we see Mark and Becky's child Callum screaming 'Let me go' and 'Me hate mum' which is also subtitled. Then the voiceover states 'and around here that's not always a given' as Callum shouts and throws objects at his mother. Afterwards, the voiceover tells us that 'Becky and Mark are learning how to cope with kids when it hasn't been long since they left school themselves'. The function of the narration is to frame these residents as infantile adults. The narration carefully disguises the circumstances that have led to their financial predicament. It heavily insinuates that single parenting creates an unregulated, unstable, and unsuitable environment for children, with the images of Becky's parenting of Callum a metonym for James Turner Street.

At no point in *Benefits Street* is there room for participants to give their own autonomous perspective free from a narrator undercutting their views with qualifying statements. Hirst accentuates his Lancashire accent, speaks with a soft reassuring tone, and uses colloquialisms (i.e. 'grand' instead of 'thousand') to provide an informal relationship between narrator and viewer. In this respect, Hirst's narration is closer to Cathy's narration and delivery rather than Sewell's. Hirst expresses a perspective with a degree of authority and insight into the on-screen characters' personal circumstances.

Yet Hirst's all-encompassing narrative leaves no room for contradictions between perspectives and the on-screen imagery, or a subsequent debate within the programme.

The Camera's Gaze

Another imperative convention of factual programming is how the camera establishes locations to frame its subject matter. In *Cathy Come Home*, there is much use of observational camerawork to observe urban landscapes, synonymous with the Direct Cinema documentary movement. Interestingly, the majority of the observational shots used to establish locations are filled with children, mostly at play. As Lacey (2011: 73) comments, such shots function to humanise their environments, thus countering the idea of children as victims as 'they survive and thrive in situations that challenge some of the stereotypical associations of poverty and the poor'. An establishing shot of the Islington flats observes a group of boys kicking a football and running to the other side of the courtyard. Once the ball is kicked, the camera zooms outwards to reveal that it has been observing them from a high angle on the second floor of the block of flats. As the camera zooms outwards our view immediately becomes obscured as washing lines enter the frame. The washing lines are hung across the first and second floor balconies of the tenement, tied to the railings on each side and crisscrossing one another. The composition of this shot reveals the confined nature of this caged space, where even a view of the sky is heavily obscured. Nevertheless, the children find a way to persevere and endure. Similarly, when the Ward family move to their caravan, the camera establishes the site through uninviting glimpses of the nearby scrapyards with its corrugated iron fences and barbed wire. This is contradicted by a following sequence that sees children running through the scrapyards and nearby fields with beaming smiles. As one child sits down on an abandoned chair after running with his friends, the camera zooms into his smiling and laughing face as the collective children's laughter crescendos to drown out all the other sounds.

Contrastingly in *Benefits Street*, recurring establishing shots, often including the presence of children, are used to heighten a sense of conflict, mischievousness and lack of discipline. Rather than being depicted as persevering in spite of their derelict environment, *Benefits Street* depicts its residents as being wholly responsible for the degradation of the environment they have neglected and left to ruin. Links in between segments feature close-ups of domestic waste in the street as a result of fly tipping. At several stages, the camera picks out empty cereal boxes, empty cans of alcohol, a discarded lollipop and a used pregnancy test. Using these objects as links in between scenes works to imprint in the viewer's mind that this is a street where people live to excess. Their neglect has turned the street into an inhospitable place rather than it being inhospitable to begin with.

Furthermore, the stock footage of children, which works as a filler in between scenes, contains an ominous atmosphere in relation to the wholesome quality of the playful scenes featured in *Cathy Come Home*. During the third episode, Hirst's narration informs us, '...on James Turner Street, kids are everywhere' as we see two children wearing boxing gloves and sparring in the street. The implication is that children are

'everywhere' as if they are a force that cannot be controlled. In the same episode, we see White Dee's son Gerrard climbing up the side of his mother's house. The lighting of the shot frames him as a dark silhouette peering down on the camera like an outstretched spider. Then, before an advert break, Dee asks the camera 'what is there for him? Is it just destined that he'll grow up and be part of a gang?' The camera then cuts to her son Gerrard wrestling with Mark and Becky's child Callum on an abandoned sofa in the street as Dee then adds 'because that's society isn't it?'. The implication here is that Dee abstains herself from taking responsibility for her son's unsupervised behaviour in the street, as we see him running through other people's front yards at the beginning of every episode.

Whereas children in *Cathy Come Home* are embracing their carefree age through harmless games whilst laughing and smiling, the footage of children here contains unrestrained mischievousness. In *Cathy Come Home*, there is a limitation to the children's exuberance as they play within the boundaries of space. Here children transcend limitations of the space and do not respect boundaries. Whilst children are seemingly the only source of humanity and civility to their inhabitable environments in *Cathy Come Home*, in *Benefits Street* they are positioned as an extension of the excess rubbish produced by the adults and in many ways, another element that contributes to the deterioration of the street.

Society

Another key convention of documentary journalism is how representatives of government bodies and institutions are portrayed. Whilst the press collectively agreed that *Cathy Come Home* was hostile to the officials encountered by Cathy, Loach (2011) intended 'to be sympathetic to the people who had to administer the unworkable situation that existed'. It is significant that *Cathy Come Home* humanises those who work for such institutions as well as Cathy herself. Different stages of the Wards' downward journey 'are represented through interviews with officials of different types, and with different degrees of power' (Lacey, 2011: 79).

Cathy Come Home is a docudrama that recognises homelessness and welfare are complex issues, and that individuals within each housing organisation have no power over the procedures they are bound by. The housing official puts Cathy's name on the list for the Smithson estate. 'He is realistic, but not unsympathetic' (Lacey, 2011: 80), and promises to see if he can move them up the waiting list in recognition of the 'gravity' of their situation. It is made clear to us that he has to fit 8,000 people into 500 dwellings, and that their case is not serious enough to rehouse them given the points system assessing those most in need of accommodation that he has to work with. The scene is shot largely from Cathy's point of view, as the official takes off his glasses and maintains eye contact with her. Moving his head to one side his body language shows he is receptive to Cathy's concerns.

As Cathy's situation worsens, the greater the power officials hold over her. Shortly before being moved from Cumbermere to her last hostel, Cathy is put before a panel headed by the warden to decide her fate as she has not found suitable accommodation in the time agreed. The camera is positioned behind two men's shoulders dressed in suits. Cathy sits at the opposite side of the room facing the camera. Her distressed face looks small in relation to the men's domineering shoulders that visually entrap her. In

this position Cathy is told 'we could take your children into care and turn you out just like that, but we're not going to we're going to give you one more chance'. Being in such a desperate position causes Cathy's outburst to the panel: '...you don't care - you only pretend to care' which leads the Warden to confirm her lack of cooperation, and she is forcibly ejected from the meeting.

Initially this attitude towards Cathy seems authoritative, condescending and controlling. However, after the meeting, the nurse suggests to the two other men that they should find Cathy somewhere where she could live with her husband. The warden's reply is that 'there's nowhere at all - we're full up. We've reached the stage that if two families were to come in tonight we'd have to evict to make room for them'. No matter how seemingly unsympathetic the people in control of Cathy's fate are, as her situation becomes more desperate, they still have an understandable rationale and are making an informed decision given their severe lack of resources, and have to discern between the deserving and undeserving poor. The overpowering visuals of the seemingly unsympathetic hostel officials are rationalised by the dialogue that takes place once Cathy has left the room. They are 'acting –as they see it – in the interests of a system that is rational and ultimately benevolent' (Lacey, 2011: 84). This rationale stands in contradiction to such menacing visuals as the officials initially seem to be dictating her fate in a wholly distanced and uncompassionate manner.

In comparison, *Benefits Streets* is not open to addressing the nuanced complexities of the housing sector or welfare state and more overtly subscribes to this notion of the deserving and undeserving poor. We are denied access to civil servants and government officials altogether. In episode 3, when Mark is turned away by the job centre, we do not witness the conversation that takes place. Instead the camera captures Mark's response once he has left the job centre. Outside Mark complains that the staff would not discuss the issue with him because his house is in Becky's name. Mark throws a tantrum outside as he swears profusely and swings his shopping bag around. Here we only have a one sided view of the type of conversation we repeatedly see in *Cathy Come Home*. The implication here is that Mark has made the mistake and has been unable to follow simple instructions, and that he is the only one at fault.

Whereas there is some degree of culpability on both sides in *Cathy Come Home* for her circumstances, in *Benefits Street*, it is simply the residents who are responsible for their fate. According to the programme's logic, Mark is labelled as a member of the undeserving poor for not finding work or following instructions. He is positioned in contrast to characters such as Hannah. In episode five, Hannah visits the council because she needs emergency accommodation to escape her violent partner. She is found somewhere immediately. Again, we do not witness the meeting, but the voiceover informs us that she 'will only have to be without her kids for the night'. Then, after she has revisited the local council, Hirst's narration tells us after a visit to the housing office 'Hannah's had good news about finding a new place to live'. The council is seen to be perfectly functioning. The insinuation is that the state will help those who deserve help, are proactive in seeking work and are attempting to eradicate obstacles to work. The onus is completely on individuals for their own circumstances as they are in control of their fate.

Audience Reaction

As Paget (1998: 79) notes, the docudrama is 'often preceded and followed by interview and discussion programmes'. After its first broadcast in November 1966, *Cathy Come Home* provoked a public outcry. The BBC's switchboard crashed because so many viewers called in to ask what they could do to help (Brooks, 2011). The housing charity Shelter released a poster the day after the January repeat screening stating there are 'literally thousands of Cathys in Britain at this moment' and correspondingly, the campaign received £50,000 in the first month. (Lacey, 2011: 116). These extra textual features extended the purpose of the play, and influenced government action. Several MPs, including the leader of the opposition Edward Heath asked the BBC for private screenings. Labour MP Frank Allaun, referred directly to Cathy during a speech on the Housing Subsidies Bill in the House of Commons, stating 'I believe the conscience of the nation has been jolted, by a television play' (Allaun, 1966). Loach and Sandford were also invited to the Ministry of Housing to discuss the housing crisis.

Benefits Street however, has gathered an equally passionate but antithetical response. The public and press have argued amongst themselves in a counterintuitive way, with those who identify themselves as being on the centre right of the political spectrum, directing hate and anger towards the James Turner residents, whilst those who see themselves as belonging to the left have aimed their contemptuous feelings towards *Love Productions*. Locked in stalemate, there has been no cooperative action between both camps to solve what they both see as an increasing problem. Throughout its broadcast, tweets were made regularly likening the James Turner residents to animals with many people threatening to kill and torture them (below).

Figure 1. screenshot of the rolling #benefitsstreet hashtag through the first episode's broadcast



At the same time however, 3,300 people signed an online petition devised by former Birmingham bus driver Arshad Mahmood calling on the broadcaster to drop the show and make a donation to charity for the damage it had caused. Similarly, the trade union Unite organised a protest outside *Love Production's* offices. Political commentator Owen Jones believes such a programme provided an 'entirely distorted picture of what our welfare state is, much to the benefit of our political elite' (Jones, 2014). Contrastingly, *Spectator* Editor Fraser Nelson felt 'this show wasn't a freak show, I warmed to a number of the characters. The villain of the piece is not the people, it's the system' (Nelson, 2014a). Whilst commentators and members of the public busy themselves arguing over who is to blame for this housing epidemic, *Benefits Street* has not been able to inspire unity or affirmative action like *Cathy Come Home*.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the terms under which the future of social security is debated are more decidedly mainstream and less radical. Although *Benefits Street* is a documentary, it has been influenced by the reality television boom, most notably in its focus on individuals rather than wider socio-political problems. Discursively, the conventions of documentary journalism in a British broadcasting context have changed. Where captions were once used to give a sense of scale of housing problems, they are now

designed to facilitate argumentative tweets during advert breaks. Where the voiceover was once used as a complex web of perspectives that could contradict one another, it now offers no space for debate as the narrator scrutinises individuals. The camera's gaze edits footage together to highlight disorder and the depiction of government officials has all but been excluded, the implication being that James Turner residents are only victims of their own negligence. Whereas the housing sector in *Cathy Come Home* is composed of under resourced individuals who want to help but are bound by archaic structures, *Benefits Street* makes no attempt understand the people who are working in government departments. This is why the public, press and politicians remained divided on the same issues. As such, television as an ideological state apparatus in Marxist terms, is less capable of providing 'an objective field to contradictions which express the effects of the clashes between the capitalist class struggle and the proletarian class struggle' (Althusser, 2008: 23).

That said, the purpose of this article is not to simply praise *Cathy Come Home* and criticise *Benefits Street*, as some values and opinions have not changed. Both programmes subscribe to a distinction between the deserving poor and undeserving poor. Cathy is very much painted throughout as a deserving poor character. She subscribes to the role expected of her by 1960s Britain by working, marrying, birthing, and engaging with emerging consumerism. Upon buying her first flat with Ray, she admires her new 'parquet flooring, tin openers fixed to the wall' and 'double glazing'. As a protagonist she provides 'real and sympathetic credibility to the social aspirations of a consumer' (Biressi and Nunn, 2005: 54). The criticism has been that 'if Cathy had been more realistically portrayed as a foul-mouthed working-class scrubber and her pretty, appealing children been replaced by appropriately snotty nosed delinquents, then the sympathies of the good, honest, hard-working and decent British people would have remained dormant' (Shubik, 2000: 113). To put it less crudely, *Cathy Come Home* makes every effort to depict Cathy as a character that is deserving of social housing and welfare. *Benefits Street* also subscribes to this same cultural distinction. Those on James Turner that it depicts as underserving poor have seemingly chosen this way of life and no attempt is made to rationalise their circumstances. That White Dee is on antidepressants, Fungi was sexually abused as a child, and Mark suffers from deafness are either ignored or mentioned briefly without being examined. These occupants are kept at a distance and treated like exhibits rather than providing an insight into the psychological reasoning for the decisions they have made.

Deciding who is deserving of welfare has been an issue prevalent since the 1834 Poor law Amendment Act. In an attempt to reduce the cost of looking after the poor at a local parish level, if people wanted help it was mandatory that they enter a workhouse. In exchange for manual labour, they were housed and clothed. Conditions were such that only the truly desperate would seek such housing. Statistics released by the Department for Work and Pensions reveal that 2,380 people died between 2011 and 2014 after their claim for Employment and Support Allowance ended because a Work Capability Assessment found they were found fit for work. It appears that this Victorian mentality towards the poorest in society has been ratified (Department for Work and Pensions, 2015: 8). Whilst people are classified as deserving or undeserving, through government policy and mainstream culture, documentary journalism continues to perpetuate the view that people can either be categorised as a 'Cathy' (deserving) or as a 'White Dee'

(undeserving). So long as 'poverty porn' programming subscribes to this way of thinking the limitations of this simplistic binary still remain unchallenged.

ⁱ Statistics obtained from the Broadcasting Audience Research Board (Barb). <http://www.barb.co.uk/> [Accessed 9 July 2015]

ⁱⁱ This can be found in an introduction to the 1976 edition of the printed script.

ⁱⁱⁱ Figures obtained from the Office for National Statistics reports on Labour Force and Employment Rates. <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/taxonomy/index.html?nscl=Labour+Force+and+Employment+Rates> [Accessed 1 September 2015]

Bibliography

Allaun, F. (1966, 15 December). *Housing Subsidies Bill*. <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/debates/?id=1966-12-15a.687.1> [Accessed 17 April 2015]

Althusser, L. (2008). *On ideology*. New York: Verso.

BBC. (1966, 29 November) *Notes on a controller's meeting*. BBC WAC T5/695/1.

Biressi, A. and Nunn, H. (2005). *Reality TV: realism and revelation*. London: Wallflower Press.

Brooks, L. (2011, September 4). *Cathy come home still rings true today*. *The Guardian*. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/sep/04/cathy-come-home-rings-true> [Accessed 3 May 2015]

Bruzzi, S. (2006). *New documentary*. London: Routledge.

-
- Cabinet Office (2010). *Building the Big Society*.
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/78979/building-big-society_0.pdf [Accessed 30 November 2015].
- Cameron, D. (2015, 26 March). *Cameron and Miliband: The Battle for Number 10*. Channel 4.
- Dahlgreen, W. (2013, May 31) Poverty-Porn TV in Bad Taste? *You Gov*.
<https://yougov.co.uk/news/2013/05/31/poverty-porn-tv-bad-taste/> [Accessed 30 November 2015].
- Department for Work and Pensions. (2015, August 27) *Mortality statistics: Employment and Support Allowance, Incapacity Benefit or Severe Disablement Allowance*.
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/459106/mortality-statistics-esa-ib-sda.pdf [Accessed 8 September 2015]
- Duncan Smith, I. (2014, January 23). *A welfare state fit for the 21st century*.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/a-welfare-state-fit-for-the-21st-century> [Accessed 1st April 2015].
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: the critical study of language*. London: Longman
- Hester, H. (2014). Weaponizing Prurience, in I. Capeloa and C. Nesci (Eds.), *Narrating Poverty and Precarity in Britain*. Berlin: De Gruyter, pp. 205-224.
- Hill, J. (1986). *Sex, class and realism: British cinema 1956-63*. London: BFI.
- Hohmann, J. (2015, July 27). *Protecting the Right to Housing in England: A Context of Crisis*. <http://just-fair.co.uk/uploads/The Right to Housing FINAL 27.07.15 .pdf>. [Accessed 3 August 2015].
- Homes and Communities Agency. (2014, June 12) *Housing Statistics 1 April 2013 – 31 March 2014*.
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/363326/housing_statistics_june_2014.pdf [Accessed 1 January 2015].
- Jensen, T. (2014). Welfare Commonsense, Poverty Porn and Doxosophy. *Sociological Research Online*, 19(3), <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/19/3/3.html> [Accessed 30 November 2015]
- Jones, O. (2014, February 18). My latest battle to stop the demonising of people on benefits. *The Independent*. <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/owen-jones-my-latest-battle-to-stop-the-demonising-of-people-on-benefits-9136123.html> [Accessed 12 December 2014]
- Kelsey, D. (2015). Discourse, affect and surveillance: gender conflict in the omniopicon. *Journalism and Discourse Studies*, 1(2), pp.1-21.

-
- Lacey, S. (2007). *Tony Garnett*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Lacey, S. (2011). *Cathy come home*. London: BFI.
- Loach, K. (2011). *Cathy come home director's commentary*. BBC DVD.
- Machin, D. and Mayr, A. (2012). *How to do critical discourse analysis: a multimodal introduction*. London: Sage.
- MacInnes, T. (2013). 'Social Security isn't just for the unemployed – 4.3 million working families get benefits too'. *Joseph Rowntree Foundation Blog*.
<http://www.jrf.org.uk/blog/2013/05/social-security-isnt-just-unemployed> [Accessed 1 September 2015]
- Miles, A. (2009, January 14). Shocked by Slumdog's Poverty Porn. *The Times*.
<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/law/columnists/article2048284.ece> [Accessed 30 November 2015]
- Nelson, F. (2014a, 9 January) *Newsnight* BBC2
- Nelson, F. (2014b, January 10). In defence of Channel 4's *Benefits Street*. *The Spectator*.
<http://blogs.new.spectator.co.uk/2014/01/in-defence-of-channel-4s-benefits-street/> [Accessed 1 December 2015]
- Nelson, F. (2014c, January 17). *Benefits Street*: the real scandal. *The Daily Telegraph*.
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/10579987/Benefits-Street-the-real-scandal.html> [Accessed 1 December 2015]
- Paget, D. (1998). *No other way to tell it: dramadoc/docudrama on television*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Shelter databank June 2015
http://england.shelter.org.uk/campaigns/why_we_campaign/housing_facts_and_figures/subsection?section=homeless_households [Accessed 30 June 2015]
- Shubik, I. (2001). *Play for today: the evolution of television drama*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- van Leeuwen, T. (2004). Ten reasons why linguists should pay attention to visual communication, in T. Levine and , R. Scollon (Eds.) *Discourse and technology: multimodal discourse analysis* , Georgetown University Press: Washington, pp. 7-19.
- White, M. (1992). Ideological analysis and television, in R. Allen (Ed.), *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*. London: Routledge, pp. 161-202.
- Wilson, D. (1970). *I know it was the place's fault*. London: Oliphant.